

BLACK AND TAN



Released in 1929, the 19-minute film *Black and Tan* features Duke Ellington and his Cotton Club Orchestra performing “The Duke Steps Out,” “Black Beauty,” and “Black and Tan Fantasy.”

Black and Tan is chiefly remembered as the first film appearance of composer, pianist, and bandleader Edward Kennedy “Duke” Ellington (1899-1974). The film was written and directed by Dudley Murphy, who later directed the 1933 film *The Emperor Jones* starring Paul Robeson. In *Black and Tan*, Duke Ellington plays himself, but as an impoverished musician. When two bumbling movers arrive to repossess his piano, his girlfriend—actress Fredi Washington, also playing herself—manages to hold them off by offering them gin. Later, at the nightclub, an ailing Washington performs in an enthusiastic

dance number despite her ill health. On her deathbed, she asks him to perform “Black and Tan Fantasy,” secure in the knowledge that she has helped Ellington continue to make music.

The poster for *Black and Tan* depicts Duke Ellington in silhouette conducting caricatured representations of his orchestra. Text on the poster reads “SACK / AMUSEMENT / ENTERPRISES / PRESENTS / DUKE ELLINGTON / AND HIS / COTTON CLUB ORCHESTRA / IN / BLACK AND TAN / WITH / FREDI WASHINGTON.” The Texas-based company Sack Amusement Enterprises was a producer and distributor of features and short films for African- American audiences during the 1930s and 1940s. The poster artist is unknown.